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ABSTRACT

In a study designed as a pilot project to test a taxonomy of noun phrases (NPs) and indicate results to be expected from a larger subsequent survey, 13 essays from a basic writing class and 10 essays from an advanced composition class were analyzed for four NP types: (1) those requiring earlier text information for full interpretation, (2) those fully interpretable on their own, (3) those requiring extra-textual, readily accessible information for full interpretation, and (4) those requiring extra-textual, not easily accessible information for full interpretation. Statistical analysis using t-tests showed that the basic essays contained significantly more NPs requiring nonaccessible information and fewer NPs containing readily accessible information than did advanced papers. These results suggest that the taxonomy of noun phrases is a useful one, but that a similar study using a larger, randomly selected sample is needed. (Author/DF)

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The Private Worlds of Basic Writers

by Dan Foster and Paul Hoffman

Previous work in basic writing has indicated a tendency for basic writers not to take their audiences into account. In Andrea Lunsford's "The Content of Basic Writers' Essays" (1980), she noted that many of the nouns used by basic writers in her study referred to the writer's personal world, making it difficult for the reader to gain access to the writer's meaning. Furthermore, she found that basic writers tended to turn even highly analytic topics into anecdotal narratives, again highly personal and difficult for the reader to interpret. Finally, she noted a tendency for basic writers to alter the focus of essay topics from the outside world to themselves. Many basic writers, when writing on the topic, "Who is the most memorable person you have known? Why?", focused "primarily on themselves rather than on the memorable person" while more advanced writers focused on the memorable person. Linda Flower's notion of "writer-based prose" (1979) applies to similar tendencies in writing, though it is not restricted to basic writers.

The current study is an attempt to formalize some of

Lunsford's ideas to a greater extent and to speculate on the consequences of some of them for the enterprise of teaching basic writing. It should be kept in mind that the study is a pilot project--its primary function is to test the formalizations and to get a preliminary notion of the sorts of results to be expected from a larger study. Though the results are intuitively appealing, they cannot be regarded as conclusive.

Methods and Analysis

The sample consisted of thirteen essays written for a basic writing class and ten papers written for an advanced composition class, both at Louisiana State University. All thirteen basic essays were written on the following topic: "Based on your own experience, decide whether lying is basically beneficial or disadvantageous to the individual." The ten advanced essays included papers on that topic as well as some on family traits, family cold remedies, and the effect of a particular advertisement on people. It would have been preferable to have had a full set of advanced papers on the lying topic, but in the absense of these we chose papers written on topics which seemed to provide opportunities for the writers to either present personal narratives or, alternately, to use personal experience as evidence to support more general conclusions.

The analysis required division of the papers into noun

phrases (NP's). Since NP's are recursive, that is, one NP can contain one or more other NP's, it was necessary to determine what level of NP would be looked at. A sentence such as "That John kicked the cat is unfortunate" contains in some analyses, three NP's: the subject noun clause, the subject of the noun clause, and the object of the noun clause. We chose to look only at the arguments of the main sentence--that is, "that John kicked the cat" was taken into account, but not "John" or "the cat". In linguistic terms, only NP's not dominated by other NP's were chosen. In more traditional terms, subjects, objects, and objects of prepositions in main clauses and adverb clauses were chosen.

The analysis was based on the following notion of semantics: Some of the words in a text are interpretable simply on the basis of word meaning (that is, "sense" in the standard view of semantics). In a sentence like, "A cat makes a nice pet", full interpretation depends only on the listener knowing what the words mean. Other words in a text can only be interpreted fully in the light of other information. That information may be available from earlier in the text. Thus, "it" in "John kicked it" is not interpretable on its own. It must have an antecedent: for example, "the cat". This need to look back in the text is part of what Halliday and Hasan (1976) claim creates "cohesion" in texts. Witte and Faigley (1981) found that there was a relationship between

number of cohesive ties and writing quality, but they also noted the importance of the relationship between the text and the real world. Such a relationship is established by words which are only fully interpretable in light of information from outside the text. In the view taken here, this "outside the text" is called the "universe of discourse". Insofar as the universe of discourse created by the text is accessible to the reader, the text is comprehensible. A sentence like "John kicked the cat" would not be fully interpretable to someone who did not know who John and the cat were. In fact, a listener confronted by such a sentence in a real world situation, ie. where the sentence is not just an example, would likely find the sentence completely incomprehensible in spite of knowing what the words mean. Previous research (Foster 1984) supports Witte and Faigley's contention, indicating that failure to use these real-world-knowledge-dependent words results in lower coherence ratings by trained readers. Thus, one of the challenges for writers is the creation of reader-accessible universes of discourse.

The following passage, taken from one of the basic papers, provides an illustration of the analysis:

> One day after a trax meet, I saw Janet talking to Tommy. I walked over, but by the time I had gotten there, Kim, a friend of mine, called Janet over to talk to her about going to a dance.

We divided the NP's into five categories:

(1) NP's which require information from earlier in the text for interpretation

(2) NP's which were interpretable without any information beyond the words themselves

(3) NP's which required information from a reader accessible universe of discourse

(4) NP's which required extra information, but for which the universe of discourse was not reader-accessible

(5) dummy NP's

In the example passage, "the time I had gotten there" was treated as a category 1 NP because the expression is only interpretable if the reader knows where "there" is, and this information is available from earlier in the text. "A trax meet" was treated as a category 2 NP because the reader need only know what a "trax meet" is to interpret the NP. Notice that while "a trax meet" is talking about a specific one, the reader is not expected to know which one (compare this to "the trax meet"). "Kim, a friend of mine" was treated as a category 3 NP. Notice that neither "Kim" nor "a friend of mine" can be interpreted without extra information. The extra information needed to interpret "Kim" comes from "a friend of mine". But the extra information for "a friend of mine" seems to come from outside the text. We don't really know what "mine" is unless we can relate it to the writer of the essay. "A friend of mine" then

easily becomes part of the universe of discourse and is easily accessible to the reader. In contrast, "Janet" is also introduced in this passage. However, we are told nothing about her or about how she fits into the universe of discourse. All a reader can confidently say is that "Janet" is a name, normally for a female human (though, animals, boats, and tropical storms occassionally have such names as well). "Janet" was treated as a category 4 NP--that is, an unsuccessful category 3 NP. Dummy NP's (category 5) were words like "there" in "There goes gramma" or "it" in "It's raining".

Results

The results of the study are as follows. T-tests showed that basic papers contained significantly more NP's not fully interpretable by the analyst (category 4) than did advanced papers. Approximately 18% of NP's in the basic papers were of this type as opposed to 2% of those in advanced papers. This result was significant at the .05 level. The advanced papers, on the other hand, contained significantly more NP's for which full interpretation was possible by reference to the universe of discourse (category 3) than did the basic papers. Approximately 35% of NP's in advanced papers and 3% of those in basic papers were of this type. This result was significant at the .01 level. The differences between basic and advanced papers with regard to cohesive NP's (category 1) and those requiring no extra information

(category 2) were not significant. Finally, advanced papers contained significantly more (.05) dummy NP's than basic papers did, but this result is likely more indicative of greater syntactic complexity than it is of anything else.

Discussion

While the results reported above coincide both with previous research and with our intuitions, they can only be regarded as an indication of the direction a larger study might point. It is becoming clear, however, that the task of teaching basic writing goes far beyond what we once might have imagined. Witte and Faigley's (1981) suggestion of the importance of tying the text to the real world combined with Lunsford's recognition of basic writers' difficulties in doing so are supported, albeit tentatively, by the current study. At worst, the task may be beyond the scope of the current higher education system, and at best it may require teachers with significant training in fields such as psychology and linguistics. At any rate, the first step in approaching the problem is a clear analysis of the problems in written texts produced by basic writers. The current study indicates that the sort of analysis undertaken here and the NP categories developed will be helpful in reaching this first goal.

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Private Worlds of Basic Writers

Abstract

This study is a pilot project designed to test a taxonomy of noun phrases (NP's) and indicate the sorts of results to be expected from a subsequent, larger study. Essays from a basic writing class and an advanced composition class were analysed for four (relevant) NP types: (1) those which required information from earlier in the text for full interpretation, (2) those which were fully interpretable on their own, (3) those which required extra-textual information for full interpretation and for which the required information was readily accessible to the reader, (4) those which required extra-textual information for full interpretation and for which such information was not readily accessible to the reader. Statistical analysis using t-tests showed the basic essays contained significantly more (.05) NP's requiring non-accessible information (type 4) and significantly fewer (.01) NP's containing readily-accessible information than advanced papers did. The other results were not significant. The results achieved indicate that the taxonomy is a useful one and that a similar study using a larger, randomly selected sample would yield useful results.